

Veterans' health matters

Research: Key to a Healthier Tomorrow

Medical research is a major focus of the Sierra Pacific Network (VISN) 21. Of the top research facilities in the nation, the San Francisco VA Medical Center (SFVAMC) has the largest funded program in VA. Last year, its annual research budget exceeded \$67 million. In second place, was the VA Palo Alto Health Care System (VAPAHCS), with a 2004 research budget of more than \$51 million.

Combined with other VISN 21 facilities, all of which do research [see chart p. 3], the Sierra Pacific Network (VISN 21) brought in more research dollars in 2004 than any other VA Network.

So what does this mean to veterans? Since the program began following WWII, research has attracted thousands of health care professionals with keen problem-solving minds, men and women whose primary focus is making tomorrow's health care better for veterans than it is today.

The Best of the Best

How well have they succeeded? Studies published in the New England Journal of Medicine and the Annals of Internal Medicine reveal that the VA

health care system outperformed Medicare and commercial managed-care programs in every one of more than a dozen categories. And recently, the National Committee for Quality Assurance, in a study which ranked health care facilities based on 17 different measures, named the VA health care system as the best in every single category, ahead of even the most prestigious non-VA facilities.

Much of the VA's success is due to the research activities of its doctors, scientists, nurses, clinicians and investigators, many of whom are also associated with leading universities.

A recent study, which ranked health care facilities based on 17 different measures, named the VA health care system as the best in every single category, ahead of even the most prestigious non-VA facilities.

At the San Francisco VA Medical Center, researcher and radiologist Judy Yee, M.D., has conducted a study showing that virtual colonoscopy is faster, safer and a potentially more pleasant technique than standard colonoscopy. Dr. Yee's study also

shows that virtual colonoscopy works just as well as standard colonoscopy.

"Since virtual colonoscopy requires no anesthesia, has a lower risk of complications such as perforation or bleeding, and may be better tolerated by

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a word from our director

Robert L. Wiebe, M.D., M.B.A.
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The Best and the Brightest

VA provides the highest quality health care in the country. Recent articles, such as “The Best Care Anywhere,” which appeared in the January/February 2005 issue of the *Washington Monthly*, document this achievement.

One of the major reasons for the high quality of care in VA is our research program. Research, along with health care, education and emergency preparedness, is one of the core missions of VA as defined by Congress.

Our active research program, coupled with our affiliations with the finest medical and nursing schools in the country, allow us to

attract and retain some of the best medical minds around. Physician-investigators welcome the opportunities in VA to pursue their passion for new knowledge and important discoveries.

VA research programs also provide diagnostic and treatment services to patients that would otherwise be unavailable in non-research clinical settings.

I am proud to tell you that the VA Sierra Pacific Network (VISN 21) has the largest VA research enterprise in the nation. VA Medical Center San Francisco is the largest single research facility in VA, and VA Palo Alto Health Care System is second.

There are more than 550 investigators in the Network—most of them are associated with prestigious medical schools such as UC San Francisco, Stanford University and UC Davis.

These researchers are focused on issues that directly affect veterans—post-traumatic stress disorder, combat-related illnesses, dementia/Alzheimer’s disease, cancer, heart disease and Parkinson’s disease.

You can feel confident that when you come to VA for medical treatment, you will have access to a team of professionals that include the “best and the brightest” in American health care. ■

VA National News

High Marks – For the fifth year in a row, a study by the independent American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) found that veterans are happier than most Americans with the health care they receive. The study showed that veterans gave VA health care a rating of 91 for customer satisfaction on a 100-point scale. According to ACSI, these results “should be considered a benchmark for [federal] agencies.”

Another recent study, conducted by RAND, an independent think-tank, confirmed that those high marks were well earned. The study, published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, found that VA

patients were significantly more likely to receive needed preventive care, as well as treatment for chronic medical problems, than were private-sectors patients.

Improving Life – The Veterans Health Administration recently conducted its annual VA Research Week, with the theme: “Improving Life for Those Who Have Borne the Battle.” Held March 27 to April 2, it celebrated the achievements of VA researchers in providing high quality care for veterans and advancing medical science. Activities at VA medical centers across the country also served to educate veterans, the public and the media about the research being conducted at those centers, and its impact on treating and preventing disease and disability.

Something Fishy – Researchers with the Department of Veterans Affairs and the University of California at Los Angeles recently discovered that Grandma was right when she told us that fish was “brain food.” According to the March 23, 2005 online edition of the *Journal of Neuroscience*, scientists now have evidence that DHA, an omega-3 fatty acid found in cold-water fish, dramatically slowed the progression of Alzheimer’s disease in mice. According to one of the study’s leaders, “Unlike many studies with mice, this one points to the benefits of a therapy that is easily available and already touted for other medical conditions.” ■

Research is Key

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patients, we hope it will increase the number of people willing to come in for screening,” said Dr. Yee, adding that the vast majority of colon cancers are treatable if detected at an early stage.

“The VA is particularly well suited to take the findings of researchers and translate them into new approaches to diagnose and treat the diseases of the veteran population,” said Dr. Thomas A. Rando, director of Geriatric Research, Education and Clinical Centers (GRECC) and chief of Neurology Service at Palo Alto.

“VISN 21 is particularly fortunate to have a broad research base, extending across the clinical services, and participating in all aspects of VA research – medical, rehabilitation, and health services research, as well as co-op studies. The research programs provide a vibrant environment and an excellent example of the integration of research with clinical care,” Dr. Rando added.

Leading the Way

It's the goal of more than 500 investigators throughout Network 21 to discover solutions, develop VA health care leaders, and create innovations that advance health care for our veterans and the nation. To help them reach their goal, the VA Sierra Pacific Network is affiliated with several medical schools, including: the University of California, San Francisco; the University of California, Davis; Stanford University; University of Hawaii; and University of Nevada, Reno.

VA researchers, including the recipients of three Nobel Prizes, six Lasker Awards, and a plethora of other tributes, concentrate on health care concerns that are prevalent among veterans.

They work to unravel questions concerning such health issues as: cancer; post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); infectious diseases, including HIV and hepatitis C; neurological diseases, including multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer's disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis [Lou Gehrig's Disease] and Parkinson's disease; kidney disease; depression; stroke, heart attack and congestive heart failure; hypertension; lung disease; bone disease; diabetes; gastrointestinal disorders; the role of estrogen in breast cancer; advanced Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) techniques; and wound healing.

The VA has become a world leader in such widely diverse research areas as aging and space travel. For example, Nick Kanas, M.D., Associate Chief of Mental Health Services at SFVAMC, received the 2004 “Life Sciences Book Award” from the International Academy of Astronautics. Dr. Kanas, who is also a Professor of Psychiatry at the University of California, San Francisco, has been conducting psychological research with NASA for 35 years and, this spring, his attention will be focused on the mission of Space Shuttle Discovery, the first space mission since the Columbia disaster two years ago.

VA leadership also led to the formal development of geriatrics as a specialty. Because of his work with aging veterans, Dr. Rando, an Associate Professor, Department of Neurology and Neurological Sciences at Stanford University School of Medicine, recently received the Ellison Medical Foundation Senior Scholarship Award in Aging, in recognition of his groundbreaking studies of the role of stem cells in age-related skeletal muscle atrophy and muscle regeneration.



VA research



VISN 21 Research Budgets – 2004

San Francisco	\$ 67,020,030
Palo Alto	\$ 51,850,101
Northern California	\$ 6,115,855
Pacific Islands	\$ 4,154,387
Sierra Nevada	\$ 1,393,801
Central California	\$ 283,692
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Total	\$130,817,860



VA facility highlights

palo alto

Fisher House Will Soon Become Reality

The VA Palo Alto Health Care System's (VAPAHCS) Fisher House project was selected by Cadence Design Systems, Inc. as the 2005 recipient of the Cadence Stars and Strikes fundraiser. As a result, the Fisher Foundation has written to the Secretary of VA announcing it would like to build a 21-room Fisher House at Palo Alto and hopefully break ground in late spring.

Headquartered in San Jose, Cadence, the world's largest electronic design software provider, has been raising money

to meet community needs since 1990. Last year, it raised more than \$1 million, which would go a long way toward reaching the \$2.5 million VAPAHCS must raise to match the Fisher Foundation's equal contribution.

The Fisher House Foundation builds housing where families can stay while veterans and service members receive VA treatment. To date, it has built 32 homes at military and VA hospitals.

"Palo Alto is a very expensive place to stay for the families of our servicemen and women, especially if their loved one is

recovering from a catastrophic injury requiring several months of rehabilitation," said Elizabeth Freeman, VAPAHCS director. "With this commitment from Cadence, we expect there'll be a Fisher House on the VA grounds within a year." ■



san francisco

Renovation, Expansion and Innovation

To remain a leader in health care delivery requires staying abreast of scientific and technological advances. To that end, we've taken some major steps recently here at the San Francisco VA Medical Center (SfVAMC) to ensure that we provide the best health care possible for veterans.

We've completed the renovation and expansion of our 30-year-old operating room suite,

resulting in state-of-the-art facilities, and have begun planning for construction for a second cardiac catheterization lab. Once it's completed, it will enable us to provide more non-surgical cardiac care for veterans.

To make better use of current technology and increase efficiency, SfVAMC fills prescriptions by computerization, using the OptiFill system, an automated dispensing machine that identifies the required medication, fills the bottle with the exact dosage and amount,

labels it (including a bar code identifier), seals it, and drops the completed order into a delivery bin. No human hand is involved in this process.

To improve access to health care, SfVAMC has expanded our medical practices clinic at the San Francisco Medical Center campus, relocated and expanded our Ukiah clinic, and will be opening a new outpatient clinic in San Bruno this summer, bringing primary care and mental health services closer to veterans living in northern San Mateo County. ■

central california

Honoring Our Veterans

The VA Central California Healthcare System (VACCHS) has continually honored and supported veterans, and this, the 60th anniversary of the "Year of Victory," will be no exception. On May 4-7, the Legion of Valor has invited more than 100 recipients of the nation's highest military honors, including the Medal of Honor, to Fresno for their national reunion.

Then, on May 9-16, the mobile Vietnam Wall Memorial will arrive in Fresno for the second time in the last 10 years. VA personnel will be prominent as volunteers in support of these two major city events, just as they have been in most veteran programs in the Central Valley.

Last year, VACCHS hosted the 18th National Veterans Golden Age Games; VA staff were involved in Veterans Day events, including the nation's largest Veterans Day Parade; and we

hosted a Veterans Day luncheon at the hospital.

VACCHS prominently displays two veteran monuments at its main entrance, a Pearl Harbor Day Memorial and a WWII Submarine Veterans Memorial. These monuments, as well as hosting several annual events at VA, including the National Ex-POW Recognition Day, 9-11 Patriot Day, and National Purple Heart Day, demonstrate our commitment to all veterans by our employees and volunteers. ■

Sacramento to Get New Clinical Research Center

A new research center, developed through a partnership between VA Northern California Health Care System and the UC Davis School of Medicine, has been officially designated as a General Clinical Research Center (GCRC) by the National Center for Research Resources, part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

The designation recognizes the research expertise of both the VA and UC Davis, and provides a dedicated location and necessary resources for conducting more medical research – investigations that could lead to better treatments for everything from Alzheimer's disease and cancer to obesity, strokes and HIV/AIDS.

The new, 8,000-square-foot center is located at the Sacramento VA Medical Center tower, on the

grounds of the former Mather Air Force Base. It's designed to allow for a wide range of research, plus office space for experts in various specialties.

While the new GCRC will join a network of 80 centers nationwide, it will be the first in Northern California outside of the Bay Area, and only one of four such centers housed in any of the nation's 157 VA medical centers. ■

Designing Services and Facilities for Veterans

The Ioannis A. Lougaris VA Medical Center, a division of VASNHCS, is undergoing some exciting changes, including a number of major construction projects to add new buildings and services. We're working to locate clinical functions where they're most convenient for veterans, to improve access and patient flow, and to ensure veterans receive medical care in state-of-the-art facilities.

The surgical and medical specialty clinics moved into the clinical addition building above the primary care clinics. Other key construction projects include the renovation of the Transitional Care Unit and the installation of a new MRI unit and cardiac catheterization laboratory.

Construction is more than half complete on the renovation of the intensive care unit, and the rehabilitation therapy project, adjacent to the emergency room, is well underway. Access to

parking is improving as the northeast parking lot, with 64 patient-only spots, is now open. Approval has also been gained to build a single-deck parking structure. Once complete, this will bring total parking capacity in line with projected parking needs for many years.

VASNHCS has also gained approval to design and build a new emergency room. The design will take place during this fiscal year, with construction in FY06/07. Please bear with us as we continue to improve. ■

Using Virtual Reality to Treat PTSD

The Pacific Telehealth & Technology Hui (Hui is Hawaiian for family) was formed in 1999 as a DoD/VA joint venture, serving as a research and development center for telemedicine and technology applications to support the healthcare needs of federal beneficiaries in the Pacific Region.

An innovative behavioral health initiative using virtual reality (VR) therapy to treat post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in troops returning from Iraq and

Afghanistan has received \$1.3 million in research funding. This collaborative research project with the VA Pacific Islands Health Care System (VAPIHCS) and Tripler Army Medical Center is the first to explore the use of VR to treat PTSD in returning troops.

Sarah D. Miyahira, Ph.D., VA principal investigator and Hui director of intramural research, explains, "To date, most of the research on PTSD has been conducted on veterans. But the sooner we're able to diagnose soldiers with combat-related PTSD and treat them, the greater the prognosis for success."

Work is underway with the Human Interface Technology Laboratory at the University of Washington, Seattle, to develop battlefield simulations for use in PTSD exposure therapy. We anticipate the VR environment will be ready for implementation in the research protocol for soldiers returning to Hawaii within six months. ■

"Research is to see what everybody has seen, and to think what nobody else has thought."

Albert Szent Györgyi

Your Health: A Laughing Matter

Laughter has long been recognized as an almost magical pain reliever and a great contributor to our overall physical and mental well-being. The famous author, editor and philosopher Norman Cousins was a lifelong proponent of the healing aspects of humor. He once wrote: “Hearty laughter is a good way to jog internally without having to go outdoors...It moves your internal organs around. It enhances respiration. It is an igniter of great expectations.”

Despite the evidence, we tend to become less inclined to laugh as we age. One study revealed that children laugh on an average of 150 times a day, while the average for adults is a mere 15 times daily. We’d like to bring our

average up a few notches and, with that goal in mind, we present a few excerpts from medical charts that came out a bit differently than was intended:

- Patient has chest pain if she lies on her left side for over a year.
- On the second day the knee was better and on the third day it disappeared.
- Discharge status: Alive but without my permission.
- The patient refused autopsy.
- Patient has left white blood cells at another hospital.
- Patient’s medical history has been remarkably insignificant, with only a 40-pound weight gain in the past three days.
- Patient had waffles for breakfast

and anorexia for lunch.

- She is numb from her toes down.
- She stated that she had been constipated for most of her life, until she got a divorce.
- The patient was to have a bowel resection. However, he took a job as a stockbroker instead.
- The patient has two teenage children, but no other abnormalities.
- The patient was flatulating between 170 and 180 pounds.



WORD SEARCH

H S S T N S G N O R V Y R L S C E I R E O R T
N I D C I A T A S N T I N O E O O G O N E E N
O S T S O I I H C L O V S A R N S N T T C D T
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|-----------|------------|--------------|------------|
| VISN | CONCERN | INVESTIGATOR | SCIENTIST |
| ADVANCE | DIAGNOSE | LEADER | SCREENING |
| ATTENTION | DISORDER | NURSE | SERVICES |
| CLINICAL | HEALTHCARE | PRESTIGIOUS | SPECIALTY |
| CLINICIAN | INNOVATION | RESEARCH | UNIVERSITY |

Research: Report from the Field

For a first-hand look at veterans' health care research activities, we recently spoke with VA Health Research Scientist Leslie A. Morland, Psy.D. Dr. Morland, whose doctoral degree is in clinical psychology, is a member of the Research and Development Committee at the VA Pacific Islands Health Care System (VAPIHCS) in Honolulu, Hawaii and has been affiliated with the National Center of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) since 1999.

Q. What are your primary research opportunities and challenges in veterans' health care today?

A. There are several military installations here in Hawaii and, because we share facilities with the Department of Defense, we do a lot of collaborative health care research. Also, Hawaii offers us some unique opportunities, given its very diverse ethnic population, the large number of military personnel returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, and the enormous expanse of the region we cover.

For example, VAPIHCS provides services to veterans in a large geographic area that includes the Hawaiian Islands, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and American Samoa. Approximately 4.6 million square miles of water separate these islands, and about 123,000 veterans live in this region. Providing adequate health care for them represents an ongoing challenge for us.

Another challenge we're dealing with involves research into the role of women in the military. While overall enlistment is dropping, there are a growing number of women joining the armed forces. Currently, they represent about 12 to 15 percent of military personnel, and that's likely to increase. Accordingly, research into health issues for

military women, such as their reproductive health care, has become a priority for the VA.

Q. In what ways has technology helped in health care research?

A. Technological advances are changing the face of health care. Given our unique geographical situation, this is especially important, and we're doing a lot of research on the most effective ways to provide quality care for the veterans we serve. Until recently, providing that care meant that individuals located in rural communities who needed treatment didn't get it, or had to travel great distances to a larger city, or the clinicians from the larger medical centers had to go to them. This required tremendous financial, travel or personnel burdens for everyone. Today, we're making greater use of telemedicine technology to ease that burden and augment the availability of and access to clinical and educational services in remote areas.

Q. Exactly what is telemedicine?

A. Telemedicine, also known as telehealth, is the use of electronic communications, primarily via remote video conferencing, and information technology, to provide and support health care when distance separates the participants. Telemedicine technology provides alternative means of connecting clinicians and patients by using various communications methods in lieu of meeting in person. One part of it, called "telemental health," refers to the provision of various behavioral health services.

Q. To date, what are the most significant health-related issues involving military personnel returning from Iraq and Afghanistan?

A. The biggest by far is PTSD. While flak jackets and other gear are saving lives, many personnel

are surviving once-fatal injuries and wounds, and we're finding the rates of PTSD to be quite high. Fortunately, based on our research to date, telemental health appears to be a promising technology that can provide skills training and assessment from a distance for individuals with PTSD. ■

Pain Medicines: The Risk of Heart Attacks or Strokes

In 2004, several reports of heart attacks or strokes in patients taking pain medicines known as COX-2 inhibitors led to one of them, Vioxx®, being taken off the market. Recently the FDA concluded that the increased risk of heart attacks and strokes is small but real.

There have also been questions about whether older drugs in the non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) class, which are closely related to COX-2 inhibitors, present similar risks. In December 2004, a study that used an over-the-counter (OTC) strength of naproxen (Aleve®) was stopped. During a safety review, it appeared that patients who took naproxen had a 50 percent higher chance of heart attack or stroke compared to the placebo.

However, naproxen and other NSAID drugs have been on the market for decades, including such commonly used OTC drugs as ibuprofen (Advil) and no problems have been noticed. So, it's unclear if they increase the risk of heart attacks or strokes. These OTC products are for occasional short-term use, and are considered safe if used in this manner and within recommended doses. ■

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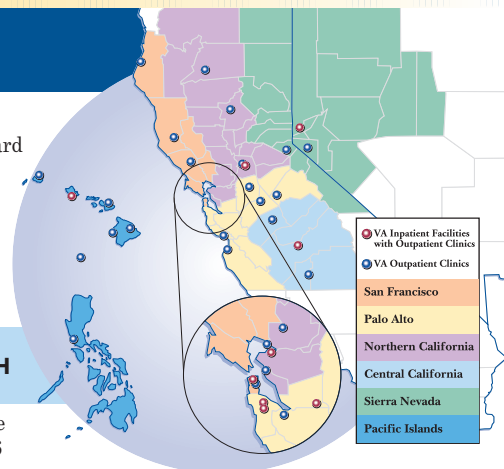
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Veterans'
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